DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 396 820 PS 024 255

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TITLE Literacy Partnerships and Scaffolding: Revisiting Vygotsky, Bassets, and Border Collies.
PUB DATE Apr 96
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, April 8-12, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Constructivism (Learning); Early Childhood Education; Elementary Education; *Emergent Literacy; *Interpersonal Relationship; Preschool Children; Primary Education; Young Children
IDENTIFIERS *Scaffolding; *Vygotsky (Lev S)

ABSTRACT

Two key concepts in the Vygotskian perspective, social interaction and scaffolding, have implications for emergent literacy. Children develop literacy as a result of trying to communicate with others in the environment. Vygotsky focused on literacy as purely social, influenced by a community of learners, including children, peers, and adults. Children increasingly understand the purposes of oral and written language as they observe how adults use literacy to construct and communicate meaning, and as they engage in literacy activities themselves. Children's creations of micro-communities, or literacy partnerships, during unstructured play and shared literacy activities, such as reading together, provide opportunities to rehearse the construction and communication of meaning and to engage in representational competence. As children come to understand the communicative nature of literacy, they form a link between their inner experience and the outer world. Vygotsky places greater emphasis on interaction among children and adults than on the transfer of knowledge from adult to child prevalent in current applications of the scaffolding perspective. As it is currently used, scaffolding suggests that adults provide the framework for literacy; whereas, Vygotsky suggested that children construct their own literacy framework. The scope and sequence of the scaffold is continually redesigned by the learner and facilitated by the literacy partner. Further research is needed on literacy partnerships to determine if they facilitate understanding of language and understanding of who constructs the scaffold. (Contains 25 references.) (KDFB)

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Literacy Partnerships and Scaffolding:

Revisiting Vygotsky, Bassets, and Border Collies

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Introduction

For the last eight years, I have claimed that we own the world's only completely untrainable dog. However, I have come to understand that what we own is a dog who is naturally predisposed to do exactly what he does and our efforts to subvert his instinctive behavior have only served to frustrate his growth and development as well as ours. "Cobra" comes from two distinguished breeds of working dogs. Cobra's mother is a Basset hound and his father is a Border Collie.

Whenever we go into our back yard, Cobra enthusiastically jumps and then runs behind us, nudging at our heels. Efforts to stop this behavior have met with limited success. For example, one dog trainer suggested that we put vinegar in a spray bottle and give Cobra a good squirt whenever he jumps. With all respect to Pavlov, Cobra merely licks the vinegar from his nose and continues to jump. A second trainer suggested that we raise our knee to meet Cobra each time he jumps and the physical reinforcer will cause Cobra to refrain. As with the vinegar, Cobra thinks this is a delightful game. Cobra is simply doing what he was born to do. He will continue to jump on us, circle behind us, and nudge at our heels. Border Collies are bred to be herding dogs and Cobra was born with a natural propensity to herd.

In much the same way, young children are naturally predisposed to be literate. We have come to understand that children are born with an instinctual drive to make sense of their world and engage in speaking, listening, reading, and writing activities that communicate their understandings (Pearson, 1993). We are also coming to understand

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that well intentioned efforts to foster literacy development through sequential processes may in fact circumvent children's natural propensity toward written and oral communication and impede literacy development. To illustrate, Guthrie (1996) writes that readers who are intrinsically motivated to read (i.e., read for authentic purposes) are more likely to develop as lifelong readers than those who are extrinsicaly motivated (i.e., read to comply with assignments and externally imposed purposes).

Recent literacy research has been based on new ways of thinking about literacy development in young children and has challenged conventional thinking about literacy (Mason & Allen, 1986; Pearson, 1993; Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Clay's (1966) definitive work with early reading replaced the traditional sequential view of reading development with a comprehensive period of development, which she named emergent literacy. In order to fully describe young children's development in reading and writing, Clay's new term, emergent literacy, has been adopted and widely used throughout the literature (Hall, 1987; Hiebert & Papierz, 1990; Mason & Allen, 1986; Morrow, 1989; Morrow & Smith, 1990; Sulzby & Teale, 1991; Teale, 1987; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). The emergent literacy perspective recognizes children's earliest attempts to make sense of their world through speaking, listening, reading, and writing and legitimizes young children's participation in these activities as indicators of literacy development.

From the emergent literacy perspective, literacy is a social phenomenon in which young children use language to construct and communicate meaning as they interact with others. Vygotsky's (1967) work with children's play emphasizes ways children use language and social interaction to construct and communicate meaning to others. For example, a child may see a block, yet create a new meaning for the block. Through language, the block might be transformed into a car, a horse, or a house. The child will then use this new meaning when communicating with others about the block. Vygotsky

notes that this transformation is mediated through language and is generally shared with others through oral language and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1967).

Vygotskian theory, as it is applied to literacy development, stresses social interaction among children and adults in meaningful literacy experiences (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). In addition, the scaffolding perspective is often associated with the Vygotskian perspective, perhaps because Bruner (1978) used scaffolding as a metaphor to explain interactions Vygotsky observed between mothers and very young children. The purpose of this paper is to ponder two key features of the Vygotskian perspective as they apply to literacy development : the role of social interaction and the role of scaffolding.

Social Interaction

During the height of Greek civilization, literate people were those who organized themselves into communities of literates to talk about what they learned from what they read and to discuss how their writing might spread knowledge among others (Heath, 1991). Historically, descriptions of literacy included ideas of personal reflection coupled with ideas of self expression and the communication of ideas (Heath, 1991). By the end of the nineteenth century, as industrialization emerged, literacy was defined more narrowly as the attainment of reading and writing skills. While the concept of a literate community remained somewhat intact, the definition of what it meant to be literate changed. Little attention was given to ideas of personal reflection. Reading and writing skills became the distinguishing characteristics of literacy. When individuals did not attain adequate reading and writing skills, they were often ostracized by the literate community for lacking individual initiative (Heath, 1991).

As formal schooling emerged in the United States, the school was seen as the primary institution for literacy development. Sequenced approaches to reading and writing instruction were instituted while the oral communication of ideas and the concept of a

literate community diminished (Heath, 1991). As a result, individual achievement replaced personal reflection, and the sequential acquisition of isolated bits of knowledge replaced self expression and the oral communication of ideas. When large numbers of students failed to move beyond minimal levels of competency in reading and writing skills, critics focused attention on schools and methods of instruction. Individual attainment, academic excellence, and global competition became hallmarks of schooling in the United States (Heath, 1991). As a result, the research agenda for much of the first half of this century followed perspectives that conceptualized literacy as the attainment of specific skills, and reading research generally focused on determining the most effective methods of instruction (Pearson, 1992). According to Heath (1991), the problem with this research agenda was that it focused on the school rather than social influences on literacy development.

The social constructivist perspective emerged during the 1980's as social cultural perspectives in literacy development were also being examined. Social constructivist models of literacy focus on interactions among people within the environment. The child develops as a result of attempting to communicate with other people in the environment not simply by interacting with the environment (Clay, 1977; Mason & Allen, 1986; Mandeville & Menchaca, 1994). Knowledge is externally constructed through dialogue as people come together to discuss what they have experienced, read, or written. Through these discussions, knowledge is externally constructed and shared among members of the knowledgeable community. Through language, the shared knowledge is then internalized by individual members of the community as they construct their own expressions of the community's knowledge. Vygotsky's work with language acquisition and cognitive development capitalizes on literacy as a purely social enterprise, which is influenced by a community of learners including children, peers, and adults (Vygotsky, 1978).

The role of community in literacy development and the role of Vygotsky's theory of social interaction in literacy development has been firmly established (see for example, Harste, 1985; Heath, 1991; Mandeville & Menchaca, 1994; Pearson, 1993; Sulzby and Teale, 1986). What I find particularly intriguing is the role of micro-communities, or literacy partnerships, in literacy development. In a recent study (Bryan, in press), kindergarten children's uses of oral language and social interaction in literacy activities during unstructured play were documented. As the children interacted together in literacy activities during unstructured play, they formed communities to participate in literacy activities. The communities established during unstructured play were short-lived, formed and re-formed each day of unstructured play. Their engagement in literacy activities while interacting in these communities included varied opportunities to rehearse constructing and communicating meaning among members of a community and to engage in representational competence (Pellegrini, Galda, Dresden, and Cox, 1991) by transforming objects and establishing roles to facilitate participation in play scenarios.

In addition to the communities established during unstructured play, the children also established micro-communities, or literacy partnerships (between two children), as they engaged in shared literacy activities. In these literacy partnerships, children's participation in shared literacy activities included more traditionally recognized forms of literacy activities, such as reading and writing together. For example, as Garrison and Steven (two kindergarten boys -- all names are pseudonyms) participated in unstructured play, they constructed a list of their classmates. Initially, Steven and Garrison took turns writing names for the list. After four names were written on the list, Garrison began to read names from the desk tags and then called out letters one-by-one as Steven finished the list. Steven and Garrison interacted in a literacy partnership as they participated in a shared literacy activity. The following data excerpt illustrates a second literacy

partnership between Steven and Garrison. They formed a literacy partnership and used known literacy concepts as they participated in a shared literacy activity.

> Garrison brings a spiral notebook and pencil to the kitchen center. He stands at the wooden cabinet and begins to write a list of rhyming words. Steven observes Garrison's writing. After Garrison has written three words, Steven offers suggestions for words to add to the list.
>
> Steven: Sat. Sat. Write sat.
>
> Garrison: Reading his list) Cat . . . fat . . . rat . . . sat . . .
>
> Steven: Lat! (Laughing) Lat . . . . nat . . .
>
> Garrison: (Garrison writes the new words and reads his list again.)
>
> Cat . . . fat . . . rat . . . sat . . . lat . . . nat.
>
> Steven and Garrison laugh.

Steven and Garrison formed a micro-community, or a literacy partnership, and participated in a shared literacy activity as they construct the list of rhyming words. Steven developed a partnership with Garrison when he added to Garrison's list of rhyming words. Steven and Garrison developed understandings about rhyming words and created an opportunity during unstructured play to participate in a shared literacy activity.

In a recent study (Dixon-Krauss, 1995), the role of literacy partnerships was examined as first graders participated in dialogue journals with second graders. Dixon-Krauss found that as these partnerships continued, the quality of written dialogue moved from simply copying the second graders' entries to responding to the entries and engaging in written dialogue. Further Dixon-Krauss found that students indicated preferences for reading with partners rather than reading with a peer group or practicing reading either in isolation or with a group. Similarly, Guthrie (1996) used a case study format to illustrate partnerships in reading ventures. He noted that Julia, a sixth grader, expressed a desire to sometimes read in solitude and, at other times, engage in a reading partnership with her

cousin. He also noted that Julia was a willing partner in her classroom contexts. In discussing motivation for reading, Guthrie (1996) points out that engaged readers read in a social context, establishing "a link between their inner experience and the outer world of books" (p. 433). This link is established as young learners come to understand the communicative nature of literacy -- that as they read they form a partnership with the author and that as they write they form a partnership with their audience. Steven and Garrison established a link between themselves and rhyming patterns of our language as they played with the set of rhyming words. The first and second graders that Dixon-Krauss (1995) observed established links as they communicated through dialogue journals. Julia established similar links with her cousin and with members of her classroom as she shared reading experiences with them. It is as though literacy involves the ability to continually form flexible, or fluid, partnerships as we engage in communicative tasks.

Flexibility in literacy partnerships can be found in a description of interactive writing by Button, Johnson, and Furgerson (1996). The authors illustrate ways that writing becomes interactive as the teacher forms various partnerships during each writing session. First, a classroom community is established that includes the teacher (Ms. Furgerson) and each of the children in her classroom. Ms. Furgerson and her students interact within this classroom community to facilitate literacy development. In addition to the classroom community, smaller, perhaps more precise relationships, are established. Ms. Furgerson establishes fluid literacy partnerships with her learners. The children, as a whole, determine the scope of the writing and the specific topics that will be addressed. Ms Furgerson completes this partnership as she scaffolds for the children so that they can be successful in their attempts to communicate through written discourse. In interactive writing sessions, Ms Furgerson engages individual children in partnerships as they contribute to the writing. For example, when the letter "I" is needed to complete the

writing, Ms. Furgerson establishes a literacy partnership with Larry, confident that he can share a letter from his name. Larry is successful as is the partnership between Ms. Furgerson and Larry. Ms. Furgerson continues the interactive writing session by forming varied literacy partnerships with children in her classroom.

While Vygotsky's work is reasonably interpreted to include implications for cooperative learning and interactive communities within classrooms, perhaps there is room in the research agenda to include further examinations of the role of literacy partnerships. From an infant's earliest child-to-parent and parent-to-child interactions, Vygotsky (1978) postulates that all language emerges from these earliest one-on-one social interactions and all that language serves a communicative purpose.

The relationship between social interaction and literacy development is built from the understandings that children develop about the communicative nature of literacy. In other words, children develop understandings about the purposes of oral and written language. Children develop these understandings by observing ways that adults use literacy to construct and communicate meaning. From an emergent literacy perspective, young children develop these understandings as they engage in literacy activities that provide opportunities to communicate ideas through oral and written discourse (Clay, 1977). Literacy development is influenced by engagement in authentic literacy tasks that serve an intrinsic need -- to communicate to others. Perhaps children engage in more traditionally recognized forms of literacy activities (i.e., reading and writing together) because the communicative nature of oral and written language is more clearly presented between two people. Further research is warranted to determine if multiple opportunities to establish literacy partnerships and engage in authentic literacy activities between individuals can facilitate these understandings.

Scaffolding

Intricately associated with the idea of literacy partnerships is the role of scaffolding. The scaffolding perspective is often associated with the Vygotskian perspective, perhaps because Bruner (1978) used scaffolding as a metaphor to explain interactions Vygotsky observed between mothers and very young children. In Vygotsky's noted parent-to-child interactions, the parent continually scaffolds, or supports, the child's earliest attempts to communicate. Approximations of words are met with affirmation of the child's approximation and then modeling of the more complete form of the word. In this way, the parent supports the child's literacy development. Literacy partnerships operate in much the same way. As Ms. Furgerson establishes literacy partnerships with children during interactive writing she scaffolds, or supports, their literacy development by observing and determining a need for instruction and then providing appropriate instruction in authentic contexts. Additional examples of scaffolding are presented in a study that examines ways young children from low socioeconomic backgrounds develop written storybook language through interactions with teachers and peers at school (Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995).

I draw a fine distinction between the Vygotskian view of scaffolding and some ways that scaffolding is applied in literacy practice today. The Vygotskian perspective differs from some applications of the scaffolding perspective in that Vygotsky places greater emphasis on the interactions among children and adults than on the transfer of knowledge from adult to child. The scaffolding perspective, as it is sometimes applied, suggests that a framework for literacy exists and that literacy development involves attempts by children to master literacy concepts implicit within the framework. From this perspective, the role of adults is to model for children and guide their attempts to construct literacy (Applebee & Langer, 1983). Adults determine both the scope and sequence of the scaffold. From the Vygotskian perspective, interactions among adults and children in

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meaningful contexts influence literacy development. However, scaffolding, as it is used by Applebee and Langer (1983), may be an inappropriate metaphor to describe Vygotsky's work because scaffolding, in that context, suggests that adults provide a framework for literacy. In contrast, Vygotskian theory suggests that children construct their own framework for literacy through their interactions with adults and attempts to reach adult conventions of literacy.

The Vygotskian perspective capitalizes on children's natural propensity toward interaction with others. Children are naturally predisposed to communicate and, through communication with adults and more knowledgeable peers, develop their innate abilities to construct and communicate meaning. From the Vygotskian perspective, the scaffold is in fact constructed by the learner. Learners, when engaged in authentic, intrinsically motivated tasks, determine their need to know and act upon that need (Guthrie, 1996). The role of the literacy partner is to provide support through appropriate instruction in authentic contexts. The scope and sequence of the scaffold is continually being redesigned by the learner and facilitated by the literacy partner.

Concluding Remarks

I find both the ideas of literacy partnerships and scaffolding by the learner intriguing. They both represent an extension of practitioners' applications of Vygotskian principles. The community concept may need to be explored further to determine if in fact fluid micro-communities, or literacy partnerships, are active. The scaffolding metaphor may need to be reexamined to determine if the learner or the facilitator constructs the scaffold. If it is the learner, then the role of the facilitator may need to be reexamined. If it is indeed the facilitator, then the role of the learner as an authentic participant in his or her own literacy development may need to be reexamined.

I feel confident that Cobra, our Basset and Border Collie mix, will most probably continue to display instinctual behaviors. I also feel confident that young children will continue to approximate adults' uses of social interaction to make sense of their world and communicate their understandings to others. I feel that there is much left to be explored concerning children's participation in literacy partnerships and their developing awareness of the communicative nature of literacy. I also feel that there is much left to be explored concerning the scaffolding metaphor as it applies to Vygotsky's theory of socially mediated literacy development.

We've learned to live with Cobra by capitalizing on his natural propensity to herd. In fact, we should not seek to discourage his instinctive need to herd. Recently, as we were away for the day, our community sponsored a Walk-A-Thon for the American Heart Association. Cobra got out that day and somehow found the multitude of walkers on the high school track. As instinct took hold, Cobra fell in line, confident that he was herding dozens of people around the track. He was so persistent that an area news team filmed him. Cobra walked more laps and raised more money for the American Heart Association than any two legged member of our community.

As educators, we too can learn to capitalize on children's natural propensity to engage in authentic literacy activities. We can develop and follow an intriguing research agenda that continues to explore the social nature of literacy.

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